

DINING

Could Pensacola become a mecca for oyster farmers? A group is working to make it happen

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With one of the longest coastlines in the country, Florida has all the potential to be an industry leader in oyster farming.

However, because of growing environmental concerns, job insecurity for oyster farmers, lack of workforce training opportunities or financial startup support, many are hesitant to take the leap into the industry.

Despite the looming challenges, Pensacola farmers and environmentalists are teaming up to resurrect the plentiful harvest of succulent wild oysters.

A group of five local oyster agriculture farms — Grayson Bay, East Bay, DeLuna, Avalon and Emerald Tide — have come together with commercial wild harvesters, restaurants, seafood markets and the SmartOysters Data Management Systems in a joint initiative called the Pensacola Oyster Cluster. The organization is focused on sustainability, restoration, community engagement, research and innovation in the local oyster industry.

The group's mission statement, put succinctly, is to "Buy local. Grow local. Eat local."

From the archives: Pensacola Bay Oyster Co. bouncing back from 2019 theft; 2 men sentenced to prison in case

Brandon Smith founded Grayson Bay Oyster Co. in Pensacola and planted his first crop in 2020. He is relatively new to the oyster game, but has quickly learned where his company, the local waterways and the state of Florida fit into the puzzle of oyster farming along the Gulf Coast.

"We're all individuals kind of working under this political oyster cluster, just to try to elevate the knowledge that we're here. Like, there is an oyster aquaculture industry here, and you can

eat local here and support local seafood here," Smith said.

For all of Smith's enthusiasm over the local seafood — and particularly oyster — market, he also recognized that Florida, in comparison to its regional neighbors like Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi, is lagging in providing institutional incentives to rejuvenate local oyster farming.

Smith pointed out that getting into the oyster business has substantial entry barriers, creating a layer of hesitancy from people considering breaking onto the scene.

"I would really like to see Florida kind of take a forefront seat in driving this oyster aquaculture industry. I mean, we have the largest coast in the (contiguous) United States," Smith said. "And yet, right now, what I see is Alabama and Mississippi, kind of taking the lead for the Gulf of Mexico for oyster aquaculture and doing a lot more for people to get into it on the entry level without having to catch substantial funds."

It's a hard-dock life

Farming oysters is certainly not the fastest, or surest, way to make a living. After dipping the bags into the sea that serve as oyster breeding magnets, most farmers will not see the final product for at least 10 months.

"It is something difficult to get into," Smith said. "It's a race for a turtle and not a hare. A lot of people who think of wanting to do something like an entrepreneur usually don't want to take as long as this takes, right? They want to jump right out and start moving."

Not only does it take a while to get started, but a lot can change in the interim. The delicate balance of water salinity can be thrown off from too much rain. Hurricanes can strike. Sewage spills can overflow into the water.

Unpreventable accidents can wipe out an entire batch of oysters for the uninsured and unlucky farmer. Often, only the most prosperous or persistent farmers survive, while most are unable to survive the financial blow of starting over.

"You take out the romanticism of Hemingway. Being out on the water; working with your hands, you take that out of the equation and you just set out black and white — 'Hey, here's a business model: You're not going to make any money for up to two years, conditions may change, you may have to move before you even see revenue.' ... I personally may be a little tentative to take that leap," said biologist Josh Neese.

Smith watched a year's worth of hard work blow past him last year in the wake of multiple oyster farm closures.

"That makes for pretty difficult business if you're not able to sell for like 75% of the year," Smith said.

Neese recalled how another farmer had to relocate their farm this past year because the conditions of the surrounding waters made the oysters unconsumable.

"She could have lost her business, to be blunt," Neese said. "She wasn't harvesting it, so she put in a year's worth of work and time and effort and money, and right before it's time to start reaping the benefits of your business, you have to move. That could be devastating for most people."

"It kind of goes back to the 'haves' and 'have-nots' of the industry structure," Neese added. "Our goal is to help the 'have nots' weather those storms. And part of our approach is that community engagement, building that support network of a mutually beneficial relationship with the stakeholder."

Even though Smith has been working days, nights and weekends on his business since his lease was approved in late 2019, he said he is yet to see the fruit of his labor.

"I'll say that we were not seeing a profit yet," Smith said. "And, you know, I think it's all dependent upon circumstances. (It) depends on when you start and what kind of environmental impacts that you're dealing with and also just closures. ... We were three weeks out from our first harvest when Hurricane Sally came, which devastated us."

Neese, who also helped found the Pensacola Oyster Cluster, has worked to find ways to support the independent farmer and help promote their individual businesses to cushion the blow of any potential setback.

Brady Hale, Pensacola Oyster Cluster marketing director, said through the organization's \$150 annual fee and monthly fundraising events, the organization is able to step in and assist farmers who are struggling.

"If our local Pensacola people are eating local Pensacola oysters, not only are they helping with the environmental issues that we face here within our bays and estuaries, but we're also helping out local businesses. These farmers are our hometown people. They're not some huge farm out in Texas or out in Louisiana," Hale said. "... When a hurricane comes through, they

lose their batches. The water gets too polluted, they don't get to harvest that week, so that means they don't get to sell those oysters."

Not only does the organization help to provide visibility for farmers, but it also helps to repopulate the waters with wild oyster habitats, which according to Neese, are now virtually nonexistent.

"Whether it's more aquaculture or wild, the more oysters in the bay, the healthier the bay's going to be," Neese said.

Rough seas and a murky future ahead

Even though those on the commercial and restaurant side of the oyster business are expressing a mixture of caution and enthusiasm, environmental experts in Northwest Florida warn that habitat changes could punctuate an oyster harvesting decline.

"The sampling is indicative of higher bacteria concentrations in our waters," said Shelley Alexander, Santa Rosa County's environmental programs coordinator.

When talking about the Pensacola Bay, Alexander pointed out that higher bacteria counts can lead to closures of waterways and even a scenario where oysters are growing to a harvesting size but are unsafe for human consumption.

She added there is a direct correlation between commercial development along the coast and dirtied stormwater running more readily into waterways.

And then there is the issue of saltwater intrusion caused by the mixing of freshwater bodies and the ocean. Alexander pointed out that an aquifer on the southern end of the county is now completely unusable because of its high salinity.

"Statistically our tides are getting higher. We're still high enough here but we do have to engineer and design stormwater systems so that they can address high tides," Alexander said.

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And this fluctuating salinity has a tangible effect on oyster life in multiple ways. Alexander pointed out that saltwater makes the oysters more susceptible to diseases, and Donnie McMahon owner of Pensacola Bay Oyster Co., told the News Journal one of the oyster's key predators — oyster drills — thrive in high-salinity water.

"Farming is filling some of the (oyster) niche, but they can't produce enough," said Pasco Gibson, chairman of the Marine Advisory Committee in Santa Rosa County. Gibson is a self-described waterman having worked with oysters for decades and ran the Nichols Seafood restaurant in Milton.

Gibson described the 1980s as a heyday for oyster farming in the area, mentioning the fact he used to sell his oysters to restaurants for \$1.20 per dozen, or what would equate to about \$3.21 in today's value.

"Every day that the weather was allowable, we were catching 100 to 150 sacks of local oysters in East Bay and Escambia Bay," Gibson said.

Gibson pinned the initial 21st century decline on Hurricane Ivan in 2004, and then said the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010 "put the kiss of death" on the local oyster harvesting market.

According to data from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, oyster harvesting has been taking a hit even before the likes of Hurricane Sally and the coronavirus pandemic.

Looking at one of the Panhandle's most influential oyster harvesting areas, Apalachicola Bay harvested over 3 million pounds of oysters in 2012. But six years later, that number plummeted over 98% to an annual harvest of only roughly 53,000 pounds of oysters in 2018.

Alexander emphasized though, that in Santa Rosa County alone, there are several ongoing initiatives to mitigate the environmental issues the oyster industry in this area faces.

She cited septic to sewer conversions, the use of vacuum trucks which suck up bacteria-heavy sediment, utilizing RESTORE funds — which are a product of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill — for coastal habitat restoration and the redirecting of treated effluent from the Navarre Beach Wastewater Treatment Facility from the sound into a Rapid Infiltration Basin system. A RIB system essentially sprays treated effluent from a wastewater facility into a basin where it either seeps into the ground or evaporates into the air.

Salty, shucked and served

Jackson's Steakhouse Executive Chef Irv Miller remembers the days in the early 1980s when wild oysters were plentiful.

"Here along the Gulf Coast, every restaurant I have ever worked in, from Seaside to Destin to Pensacola over the past four decades — I have always served oysters. Shell oysters or shucked oysters, and often both simultaneously," Miller wrote in an email.

Though wild oysters are not as abundant as they were in the 1970s or 1980s, Miller said he recognized how the craft, farmed oyster scene has blossomed throughout Pensacola.

"I was there when Pensacola Bay Oyster Company served their first harvest and a dozen oysters began at \$36 or \$3 a piece. It was the new future for the craft oyster," Miller wrote. "Now we have four or five farms here in Pensacola alone. And upwards of three dozen farms from Florida to Texas ... demand throughout the country is driving the resurgence, as well as excitement to reinvent (and) craft the beloved East Bay oyster. Everyone remembers the East Bay wild oyster, it's the one we're famous for! However, introducing a smaller craft oyster has been a culture shock in this neck of the woods."

Miller wrote in his 2018 book "Gulf Coast Oysters" about how craft oysters are unique in the way they carry the flavors of their environment.

"In the world of wine, the grape tells you the whole story — the appellation and its climate, the vineyard and its soil, and the vintner's technique for making the wine," Miller wrote in the book. "For the American oyster, this boils down to the bay's influence. The story is told by the bay or estuary, distinct climate influences, and the grower's method of care and cultivation."

Miller said he remains hopeful about the uptick in oyster farming, particularly because of the recent interest in craft or boutique oysters.

"I support local land and sea farmers of all sorts. And they all help put Pensacola on the culinary map," Miller wrote.

Pearl & Horn Sous Chef Eddie Johnson said the way that oysters absorb the flavors of their environment makes them stand out from other types of seafood. While Pearl & Horn rotates oysters of varying size and salinity, customers have the opportunity to take advantage of different experiences.

He mentioned how a Sea Stone oyster out of Virginia will pick up the flavors of "salty thyme" with a seaweed flavor finish, while Pensacola-grown oysters have the "perfect amount of salinity" in the brine and include a sweet finish.

"For instance, if it rains real heavy, you end up with less salt in the water," Johnson said. "The oyster will be kind of watery instead of having the saltiness of the brine."

Johnson noted the local oysters he orders always come full of volume and at peak freshness, two to three days after harvest. When compared to other regional sellers, local oysters are just as affordable, he says.

"They're delicious. I'm very impressed with the quality of our local oysters now that these farms are growing and they're able to supply oysters for more people," Johnson said.

Looking forward to the horizon

Donnie McMahon, the oyster farmer who owns Pensacola Bay Oyster Co., was one of the first to bring boutique-style oysters to Pensacola.

He told the News Journal he also wants to develop a center for workforce training and education to build upon Pensacola's "blue" economy.

Though there is no set-in-stone definition for a blue economy, according to the World Bank, it refers to using the ocean's resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods and jobs while preserving a healthy ocean ecosystem.

In simpler terms, McMahon deems it as taking advantage of the Gulf's resources to grow more protein, provide more jobs and continue to develop a working waterfront. Locally, there are a variety of ways this is visible in our workforce.

"Everything from marine mechanics, boats, offloading, welding, hatcheries, delivery, processing, science ... is that enough?" McMahon said.

McMahon, who also serves on the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Marine Fisheries Advisory Committee, recently attended a conference in Puerto Rico discussing the topic. One of the major talking points was the need to stock the seafood supply in domestic waters, versus relying on other countries.

McMahon said he has learned the United States is two to three decades behind other countries, like Australia, who have made the necessary changes to be industry leaders in developing their seafood market.

However, when looking to create more jobs to fuel the blue economy, there needs to be education and workforce training in place. Many of those who were previously trained in the seafood industry have since left their positions post-pandemic, McMahon added.

"It's going to take time to develop those skills. I mean, where do you find a hatchery manager? Technicians, managers, scientists?" McMahon said.

Smith said he has a similar vision in terms of establishing Gulf aquaculture involving the next generation.

"I would like to see a little bit more diversity in our industry as well, with people just coming right out of school (and) minority (demographics)," Smith said.

The Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Legal Program, which is attached to the University of Mississippi's School of Law, released a case study on rule changes in Alabama to shellfish aquaculture. Part of those legal changes include measures that alleviate the burden of joining the oyster industry.

"In Alabama, the legislation passed in 2013 that led to the adoption of the new fee structure for leasing state-owned water bottoms for shellfish aquaculture reduced initial permitting confusion and out-of-pocket expenses by more than \$5,000," the case study reads.

Smith said this type of strategy is not as widely utilized in Florida.

"So right now, what we're seeing is, it's just kind of up to the individual. I would really like them to take a driver's seat and get into supporting grants for entry level," Smith said.

Finding employees equipped to do the work of an oyster farmer is a hard feat, McMahon said, since there are not a lot of local programs introducing students into the industry.

McMahon's vision is to establish a research facility and center for innovation at the Port of Pensacola, which he said will create more jobs that will trickle into the local oyster industry.

According to a survey published in the Port of Pensacola's 2019 vision plan, one of the future desires for the location includes a center to do just that.

One of the proposals — created in association with the survey — which embodies this vision, is the 1559 Harbor School, a laboratory K-12 center focused on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) education with blue-economy studies. The school is envisioned to be a magnet program that would also include vocational training opportunities.

When putting that piece into place of preparing skilled workers for the blue economy, McMahon said he believes that Pensacola has the potential to lead the state in innovation and research.

"The best ones (oysters) are right here," McMahon said, smiling.